The poetics of personal behaviour: the interaction of life and art in Russian modernism (1890-1920)

Ioffe, D.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Chapter 1.

Deciphering the memoir: the stratification of narrative techniques in European mnemocentric literary discourses.
Memoirs and autobiography in theory and scholarship (a concise historiographical introduction).

1.0. The various genres of autobiographical writing

The great majority of the primary sources that I will address in the present study belong to what is called “memoirist discourse”: autobiographical and diary-like texts that describe thoughts and events from someone’s personal life. On the basis of these texts it is possible, at least to a certain extent, to re-create a narrative of a person’s past and to produce a picture of his behavior. Whether fictional or true, the memoiristic texts are crucial to what I intend to investigate: the complex relationship between autobiographical texts and artistic behavior during the period of Russian Modernism, 1890-1920.

Contrary to the relativist and Deconstructivist attitude of Jacques Derrida and some of his associates, who do not seem to consider autobiography as valid document or historical testimony (and sometimes go as far as to deny the very possibility of reconstructing any “history” at all), I am convinced that there is a distinct relationship between an autobiographical text and the “real life” of a narrating person. In particular I subscribe to Yurii Lotman’s views (see Chapter 2), expressed in many of his studies on Russian culture, on the semiotic sign-motion “from life to art” and vice versa.

In order to study the phenomenon of Russian Modernist “Lebenskunst” I will make general use of the many kinds of autobiographical writings available. These are, mainly:
1) pure autobiography (stories about the self, with the author as both the principal narrator and the main character, who makes explicit and revealing confessions about his own life, e.g., Maksimilian Voloshin’s “The story of my soul” (“История моей души”) and Andrei Belyi’s three volumes of autobiographical writings and memoirs and his not fully published text known as “Materials for a biography. The intimate ones” (“Материал к биографии. Интимный”)).

2) personal memoirs, including memoirs dealing with “third parties” (i.e., written about cultural figures other than the narrator himself): published reminiscences of and about important cultural figures of the period;

3) epistolary materials of many kinds: private letters and personal communications written in view of (later) publication, e.g., the correspondence between Blok and Belyi or between Briusov and Petrovskaia;
4) private notebooks and diaries of all sorts, mostly not intended for publication, e.g.,
the notebooks of Blok or partly Voloshin;

5) works of “traditional fiction” that contain obvious autobiographical or memoirist
elements; materials that do not have documentary value but that are of biographical or
autobiographical interest, e.g., Belyi’s “Bush” (“Куст”), Blok’s “Retribution”
(“Возмездие”), Briusov’s “Fiery Angel” (“Огненный ангел”), and the like.

One of the crucial problems of autobiographical writing is the issue of the author’s
intention: did he write the text with a clear eye to publication or, rather, for
undisclosed personal reasons? In the first case, the text may turn out to be the result
of a deceptive enterprise: the author may have changed the “facts” or left out some
things that should have been narrated. In the latter case, we can be relatively more
certain that the narrated events are really “true” and “authentic”. One of the key
notions in this respect is what French critic Philippe Lejeune has proposed to call the
“autobiographical pact” – a virtual agreement between the writer and the reader with
regard to the authenticity of the “narrated” facts.

1.1. Lejeune and the concept of the “autobiographical pact”

Among the crucial problems in the study of memoirist literature is the issue of the
author’s intention. Authorial intention is, of course, always important in literature, 35
but it has an even greater significance for the autobiographical and memoirist genres:
the author’s intention determines the way in which we read the text: as a pure
intimate reference with no pretension to posing, or, on the contrary, as a deceptive
text intended to amuse its author and confuse the public (e.g., the controversial
memoirs of Georgii Ivanov). According to the author’s conception of the future
destiny of his text, he decides which elements will be included and which silenced
and thus excluded. It is, therefore, highly important to distinguish between “private”
and “public” texts: texts for personal use only as opposed to texts clearly intended for
publication. We should approach in a considerably different way the diaries by
Aleksandr Blok, which were strictly private, and those of Zinaida Gippius and Dmitry
Merezhkovsky, which were published by their authors in contemporary journals and
newspapers.

Whenever we are dealing with the texts of “private” diaries, we can assume that
the author’s intention is to be authentic and true, and that the reader in turn accepts
them as true.

This “autobiographical pact” also obtains when the author changes his views
during different periods of his life. The reader continues to believe in the authenticity
of the “narrated event”, even if the same event is described differently in the
autobiographical texts written in different periods; the inner contradictions of these

35 On this see Harney 1984; Swinden 1999; and, most recently: Mitchell 2008.
texts are reconciled with the author’s primary declaration about the truth-value of his non-fiction. We find a good example of such contradictions in Andrei Belyi’s reminiscences of Blok: Belyi wrote several essays about Blok in which his narratives of the same events have considerably different evaluative “intonations”.

According to the definition formulated by Lejeune in Le pacte autobiographique, autobiography can be understood as the product of an almost “boundless solitude”. Lejeune describes autobiography as a “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality”, and where “the author, the narrator, and the protagonist … must be identical”. This definition underlines the necessity of individualism for this literary genre and the impossibility of any autobiography being successfully written as a “communal” or “collective” enterprise.

According to Lejeune, the autobiographical pact is opposed to the pact of fiction. A person who writes a novel (even if it is inspired by his life) does not ask the reader to believe in the essential truth of what it tells, but simply counts on this belief as if it exists a priori. The autobiographer, on the other hand, suggests that what he is writing is genuinely true, or at least is to be perceived as what he believes to be “real”. The autobiographical writer behaves like a self-appointed historian or chronicler, except that the subject about whom he promises to give correct information is his own self. If he hides the truth or deliberately changes the “facts” that from other sources we know to be different, we can assume that his testimony is not credible. However, it is impossible to say that a novelist “lies”: this does not make sense, as he did not intend to tell the clear empirical truth in the first place. In addition to its aesthetic merits, the text of a novel can be judged as being mimoctically realistic or not, purely imagined, logically coherent or incoherent, and the like; but there is no possibility of making a distinction between complete truth and complete forgery. An autobiographical text, on the other hand, can be legitimately checked (even if in practice this is very difficult) by a meticulous historical investigation. An autobiographical text may even entail, according to Lejeune, a hint of legal responsibility for its author. With Lejeune, it is like an act of real life, even though it can also have the “attractiveness” of a work of art if it is skilfully written and “put together” well.

The critic is interested to uncover the process how the reader recognizes autobiography. Sometimes the reader is helped by the titles themselves (Memoires, Memories, History of my Life, etc.), or a subtitle (“autobiography”, “account”, “memories”, etc.). Sometimes there is a special explanatory foreword by the author, or some sort of declaration in the beginning of the text or on the cover of the book. This explicit statement of authorial intention invites the reader to be involved with what constitutes, as Lejeune believed, the core element of the autobiographical pact. In many cases, this pact involves a belief in the virtual equivalence between the author whose name the cover bears and the personage whose story is actually told within the text. It is also important to observe that one does not perceive and read an autobiography and a “fictitious” novel in the same manner. With an autobiography, the relationship to the author is more intense (you are asked to believe in what is

---

36 On this see Япов 1989: 5- 34; and also Fleishman 1987: 221-245.
being shown: the author demands your attention or an even stronger feeling, frequently eliciting your reaction to the person being described as if he were a real person being observed in everyday life through a key-hole), whereas with a novel it is more disconnected.\(^{38}\)

In his relatively recent essay “How Do Diaries End” (2001), Lejeune proposes some interesting new insights on the theory of autobiographical genres. His remarks particularly concern the implicit “genre requirements” that influence any autobiographer in creating his private diary. These generic presuppositions deal with the problem of the beginning and the end of a diary. In Lejeune’s description: “The beginning of a diary is almost always indicated: it is rare to begin one without saying so. In one way or another, you mark off this new territory of writing – with a name, a title, an epigraph, a commitment, a self-presentation”.\(^{39}\)

The end of a diary is even more complex than the beginning. Whereas an autobiography can easily be “wrapped up”, it is much more problematic to decide how to “finalize” a diary. Lejeune distinguishes several types of endings: “a) a voluntary and explicit stop (to a journal that has not been destroyed); b) the destruction of a diary (an energetic and definitive closure); c) a rereading (subsequent annotation, table of contents, indexing); d) publication (a transformation that assumes some sort of closure)”\(^{40}\). There is a great contrast between the “simplicity of a diary’s beginning” and the “evanescence” of its ending. Accordingly, “the multiple forms ending can take (stopping, destroying, indexing are all different, even opposite actions); the uncertainty of point of view (is the ending the act of the person writing – and at what moment of writing? – or of the person reading?); and the impossibility, most of the time, of grasping this death of writing”.\(^{41}\)

Lejeune contemplates one key possible difference between the autobiography and the diary as two supplementary ways of writing. This difference concerns, possibly, the “finiteness” of autobiography as opposed to the specific qualities of a diary as a genre that in principle may have no conceptual or intentional end at all: “…All autobiography is finishable. … ‘[H]ow to’ handbooks devote entire chapters to the rituals of closure. That you survive your autobiography is only a consequence of the fact that the act of writing, situated in time, can only be imagined from the perspective of the diary”.\(^{42}\)

The critic maintains, that any diary in principle may be “virtually unfinishable from the beginning”, and the reasons for that he finds in “a time lived beyond the writing”, which in turn creates a necessity to move on and to record down everything he can, before “this time beyond” “will take the shape of death”. Because of that, any diary is always somehow focused “towards the future, so if something is missing, it is not the beginning, but the end that changes in the course of writing it”. Lejeune tells that when he “meets up with the future”, it usually “slips away” from him “by showing up once again in the beyond”. “To finalize a diary means to cut it off from the future and integrate that future in the reconstruction of the past”. The scholar

\(^{39}\) See: Lejeune, Lodewick 2001: 102.
\(^{40}\) See: Ibid.
\(^{42}\) See: Ibid.
proposes a special “movement”, which he suggests to call “a shuttle”, and that movement “aims to recuperate periodically the diary as an autobiography”.

We can make a valuable use of this point, which we might call “memorized finiteness” to try to determine the real concealed intention of the author. We can better understand how an autobiographical text was originally conceived when we consider its closure. A well-considered and clearly indicated ending almost always suggests the author’s direct or indirect intention to have his text read by the public (thus somewhat diminishing the degree of authenticity and “spontaneity” of the narrated events).

The issue of the “end” of a diary or autobiography is important in many respects to research on Russian Lebenskunst. In fact, it provides us with the ability to judge for the narrative authenticity with regard to the author’s intention. We may assume that a well-elaborated and obviously artificial ending almost always suggests a greater degree of orientation toward the “public”, being less spontaneous and less intimate. We might conclude that the very moment of the textual “determination” can be the key point for deciding the nature of the limits of the proper closing for a personal diary. Lejeune observes: “as soon as the end of the autobiography has been determined, this provisional opening will be reintegrated as an element belonging to the past world that one will have ‘closed’”.

In general, I would propose to treat autobiographical writings as a fragmentary division of a much broader complex universum of the “texts of life” that constitute a semiotic corpus of research with respect to the poetical “code of conduct” (or creative behavioral “self-fashioning”) of human culture. The concept of a “life-text” can potentially embrace in its scope both the physical events of one’s empirical “personal history” and the corresponding self-reflective immediate verbalization of it, being a first-hand fixed narration and its natural sequence. Good examples of such (verbal) texts of life can be found in the various collections of autobiographical materials (diaries, memoirs, epistolary materials of all sorts, private reminiscences, and so forth). Accordingly, a possible way of scholarly treatment of such a “text of life” would mean a close reading of personal statements, both those made by the cultural figure himself and those in the memoirist writings of his relatives or colleagues. All these statements underlie my future reconstruction of a cultural figure’s personal poetics of behaviour. To correctly understand how those texts operate, and to adequately use them, are primary goals for my study.

The notion of the “autobiographical pact” helps to properly delineate the genre of all the writings examined, and to establish a solid foundation for holistic description of the primary texts utilized for the study of Russian Lebenskunst. This virtual pact stands behind any instance of mnemocentric writing and is relevant for almost any memoirist structure. The correct determination of its genesis and function is crucial for a scholarly reading of these texts. Lejeune’s discussions of the genre of the diary and of the differences between the diary and autobiography are still relevant to much contemporary Western scholarship in the field of “ego-writing”. In some of

---

43 See: Ibid.: 103-104.
45 Here I use the terminology introduced by Yurii Lotman. See, for instance, Лотман 1992-1993-а: 369-378; and Лотман, Успенский 1973: 282-293.
these studies, the various kinds of autobiographical texts are denoted as “egodocuments”. This apt term is used as a generic one to designate almost any specimen of self-reflective and memoirist “writing-of-the-self”; in our discussion, we can apply it to the analysis of Russian modernist Lebenskunst.

1.2. Georges Gusdorf and the “unresolved unity” of “remembrance”

Many interesting aspects of the highly individualistic and imaginative “synthetic illumination” of autobiographical writings can be found in the late Georges Gusdorf’s scholarly contribution to autobiographical theory. I refer to his essay “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography”, which was published in James Olney’s collection of papers entitled Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical. As Gusdorf remarked in his article, the peculiar intention of any autobiography as a literary genre relates to the self knowledge “that it recomposes and interprets a life in its totality”.

Gusdorf believes that an “examination of consciousness” performed in autobiography is always limited to “the present moment” of its writing, and inevitably it gives only “a fragmentary cutting from the personal being” while there can be no guarantee that it will continue further in time. Dealing with the role of the “I” in autobiography, Gusdorf remarks that “in recounting my history I take the longest path, but this path goes within my life and leads me from ‘me’ to ‘myself’. The recapitulation of ages of existence, of landscapes and encounters, obliges me to situate what I am in the perspective of what I have been”.

Gusdorf meditates on the “unresolved unity” (or rather the “mystery-coloured” scope) of any auto-reflective account that deals with a person’s private experience. In his view, the individualized unity represents “the mysterious essence of my being”, which he in turn describes as “the law of gathering in and of understanding the acts that have been mine”. This means, according to Gusdorf, to be able to embrace “all the faces and all the places where I have recognized signs and witnessed my destiny”. If to put this differently, autobiography for this scholar “is a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience the true consciousness of it”. “In any ‘immediate moment’ the agitation of things ordinarily

---

47 The Dutch researcher from Rotterdam Rudolf Dekker has recently shown that the general use of this “idea” may fit into many historical quests for the inner view of the “operating subject”, not available otherwise. Dekker informs us that: “the term egodocument was coined by the Amsterdam historian Jacques Presser”. Dekker discerns that “Presser needed a blanket term for the texts in which he was interested: autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and personal letters. He defined egodocuments as those historical sources in which the researcher is faced with an ‘I’, or occasionally (Caesar, Henry Adams) a ‘he’, as the writing and describing subject with a continuous presence in the text. Sometime later he formulated it more succinctly as ‘those documents in which an ego deliberately or accidentally discloses or hides itself...’... Presser’s useful neologism was generally accepted, to which its inclusion in the latest editions of the standard Dutch dictionary by Van Dale testifies...”, see Dekker 2002: 15. See also Peter Burke’s “Representations of the Self from Petrarch to Descartes” (1996: 20-22). In his Origins of the Individualist Self (1997), Michael Mascuch regards autobiographical writing as a “cultural practice” in which the text is a public exhibition of the writer’s identity, the “self-identity”.
surrounds me too much for me to be able to see it in its entirety”. After this formulation, Gusdorf comes back to the idea of the virtual centrality of “remembering landscapes”, of one’s ability to undertake a cautious act of synthetic *remembrance*. Memory gives a person “a certain remove” and then permits him “to take into consideration all the ins and outs of the matter, its context in time and space”. The ability to “remember” resembles in the eyes of the critic a sort of “aerial view” which, accordingly, “sometimes reveals to an archaeologist the direction of a road or a fortification or the map of a city invisible to someone on the ground, so the reconstruction in spirit of my destiny bares the major lines that I have failed to notice...”.

The importance of human memory in verbalizing and reconstructing the possible landscape of one’s physical behavior is, seemingly, self-evident. This includes the attention focused on the “idea of a closely remembered past” that results in the masterfully contingent and well-wrought narrative of any convincing autobiography. We should not forget, Gusdorf insists, that “the past” is not the only traceable player operating within the boundaries of this literary genre, though it is the most noticeable and most influential one. According to him, autobiography is not simple verbal “repetition of the past” as it was, for recollection brings us “not the past itself” but only the narrativized “presence in spirit of a world forever gone”. If to follow the critic, “recapitulation of a life lived claims to be valuable for the one who lived it, and yet it reveals no more than a ghostly image of that life, already far distant, and doubtless incomplete, distorted furthermore by the fact that the man who remembers his past has not been for a long time the same being, the child or adolescent, who lived that past”. The image of the past, according to Gusdorf, is always consciously “recalled” by the autobiographer, losing its “flesh and bone solidity”, but gaining an “intimate relationship to the individual life”. This process of “recollection” occurs during the passage of time, reaching the realms of the verbal in order to be “rediscovered” and “drawn together”, extending beyond what Gusdorf calls “the natural powers of time”.

We must learn to grasp, Gusdorf notes, the comprehensive cognition of the underlying “secret” impulse that gives birth to the very first sentences of a memoirist’s writing. “Such is doubtless the most *secret purpose* in every exercise in *Memories*, *Memoirs*, or *Confessions*. The man who recounts himself is himself searching his *self* through his *history*; he is not engaged in an objective and disinterested pursuit but in a work of personal justification”.

Autobiography, according to the critic, yields to the reflections of “an aging man” who contemplates his past and scrutinizes it in order to understand the inner meaning of the events. According to Gusdorf, confession as a genre is just a very peculiar attempt aimed at commemorating the precious and meaningful phenomena that happened, but at the same time, as he understands this, the confessor is “searching for a hidden treasure, for a last delivering word, redeeming in the final appeal a destiny that doubted its own

---

50 See: Gusdorf 1980: 30.
51 See: Ibid.
53 See: Ibid.
54 See: Gusdorf 1980: 32.
The problem of the author’s physical age must not be neglected when evaluating the autobiographer’s general environment and setting. The aging person, according to the critic, somehow “projects his life into narrative” emphasizing the value of the existence that has just passed. During this process “a memorizing self” aims at reconciling with his own past while “he brings it about in the very act of reassembling the scattered elements of a destiny that seems to him to have been worth the trouble of living”. Any literary work that exploits “memory” necessarily reveals an author who “offers himself as an example of the means of perfecting this destiny and of bringing it to a successful conclusion”. There is, then, “a considerable gap between the avowed plan of autobiography, which is simply to retrace the history of a life, and its deepest intentions …of the individual being”.

The perennial problem that challenges any scholar of autobiography is one that relates to the non-identity or irreconcilability of two corresponding objects: that of physical reality and that of its rendering in writing. The colorful examples from the well-known battlefield details of Tolstoy’s prose help to illustrate Gusdorf’s idea with regard to the duality of self-writing narration: “It is obvious that the ‘narrative of a life’ cannot be simply the plain image-double of that life. Lived existence unfolds from day to day in the present and according to the demands of the moment”. Gusdorf implies that in War and Peace, Tolstoy demonstrates the huge divergence which one may see between “a real battle” that has been actually experienced by all the combatants, who cannot fully grasp and understand “the narrative of the same battle put in fine logical and rational order by the historian”, who, accordingly, is professionally aware of “all the turning points and the outcome of the conflict”.

This quotation attests Gusdorf’s interest in determining what he called the “autobiographer’s original sin”, his “dubious duty”, and the unifying “thread of the narrative” that can deceive its reader. According to him, the “original sin” of this genre of life-writing has to do a lot with logical inherence and rationalization. Gusdorf holds that the narrative must be always necessarily conscious. This authorial consciousness defines the resulting narrative, but, as Gusdorf says, it is clear that it has actually also de facto construed the narrator’s own physical existence. Gusdorf asserts that “the act of reflecting” is “essential” to any conscious awareness being transmitted “by a kind of unavoidable optical illusion, back to the stage of the event itself”. The scholar assumes that there might be a need for a sort of “Bergsonian critique of autobiography”.

According to this view, Henri Bergson deconstructed the previously outspread ideas which dealt with the universal religious concept of “free will” and clarified the required grounds for analyzing the literal reconstruction of any memorized mode of conduct. In wake of Bergson’s critique, Gusdorf argues that “at the decisive moments there existed a clear choice among various life possibilities, whereas in fact actual freedom proceeds on its own impetus and there is ordinarily no choice at all.” In this respect, “autobiography is condemned to substitute endlessly the completely formed

---

56 See: Ibid.
57 See: Ibid.
58 See: Ibid.
for that which is in the process of being formed”.  

It might be, therefore, important to recall at this juncture that the philosophical oeuvre of Bergson was particularly influential on Western literary Modernism in general and Russian in particular. 

Gusdorf’s final conclusion seems to offer the right approach to Lebenskunst aesthetics of life-creation: “autobiography appears as the mirror image of a life, its double more clearly drawn—in a sense the diagram of a destiny”.

1.3. The different genre-variants of self-narration: James Olney and István Dobos

In his studies on autobiography, the American scholar James Olney goes somewhat further than his teacher and elder friend Georges Gusdorf: he distinguishes several important types of autobiographical life-writing, maintaining the impossibility of producing a definition that will successfully embrace the “wide range of practices and intentions” that we allow to be covered by the term “autobiography”. He proposes to outline a number of autobiographical sub-genres. Following Gusdorf, Olney distinguishes the same central element (“bios”) which unites the general way this mode of writing is accomplished into a “cohesive practice”, creating, many “sub-genres”, such as “autopsychography and autophylography”. Autobiography, Olney contends, may be initially “described as the writing of a life by the person who has lived it”. There will always be a necessity to refer to the concrete variety of (physical) human life that was “involved” in this writing. Olney calls this variety of life “the specific kind of bios … individual or communal, mental or physical” which “will be determinative for the written account not only in a substantive but in a formal way”. Olney admits that the “hybrid terms” (including “autobiography”) which he employs “are awkward and unequal and unliterary and woefully incomplete”, but, he insists, “being all these things they may better reflect the true state of affairs with autobiography than if they were otherwise”.

Olney provides us with his vision of a series of specific genre “sub-varieties” that autobiography can possibly have. In developing his theory of life-writing, Olney proposes a number of solid component genres of which autobiography might consist: “six, more or less arbitrary, sub-varieties of autobiography, six (from among many more possible) terminological indications of the shape and direction an autobiography may take: autosociography, autoautography, autopsychography, autophylography, autoobituography, and autosoteriography”. According to Olney, all

60 See: Ibid.
61 On the importance of Bergson in Russian modernist culture see two recent monographs: Nethercott 1995 and Fink 1999. Bergson’s treatment of memory deeply influenced European Modernism (Proust). In his treatise on the philosophy of memory, Matter and Memory (1911), Bergson demonstrates the mechanisms which contribute to his theory of “pure perception”, how the image of a material thing becomes a genuine “re-presentation”. The French philosopher maintains that perception adds nothing new to the image “representation is a diminution of the image”; the transition from image to pure perception is “discernment in the etymological sense of the word” (a “slicing up” or “selection”) etc. See: Bergson 2004: 27-29.
these categories are meant to deal with autobiography as a unique “mixed breed” in order to encompass all the “extra-literary, as well as (often) non-literary” qualities it may exhibit. “One almost never has autobiography alone to deal with”. Instead of this, he believes, the analytical scholar is always compelled to counterpose “autobiography and psychology, autobiography and soteriology, autobiography and politics, autobiography and sociology, etc.” 64

Olney sharpens and elucidates his point by refining the essence of autobiography as a quasi-apologetical “self-saviouring” (therefore his reference to soteriology) and an epistemologically refined genre. He approaches, for example, “autobiography as synecdoche” from a hermeneutical standpoint, asserting that autobiography “does, in fact, as Gusdorf says any autobiography will, add something to this whole of which it constitutes a moment”. Developing this “partial” connection, Olney concludes that “the relationship of autobiography to life is the synecdochical relationship of part to whole”. He proves his case by asserting that “both part and whole, the book and the life, are to be interpreted according to the principle of the hermeneutical circle or hermeneutical spiral, a paradox that says that we can understand the whole only if we understand the part(s) but we can understand the part(s) only if we understand the whole, and so interpretation must proceed by continual reference back and forth with a slight increment of comprehension here producing a slight increment of comprehension there and so on”. 65

In another essay, “Transmogrifications of Life-Writing” (1997), Olney discusses the development of the genre of literary “confessions”, from Augustine to Rousseau. In describing a favorite recurrent metaphor of “reciting a psalm”, Olney uses a model of the human mind which posits that, “by means of its unique memorial capacity”, the mind “can contain an entire life, primed for recitation”. Humankind may be regarded as a “unique species”: it is “the only known narrating animal”. Olney quotes Brian Stock (author of Augustine the Reader), who wrote that life is a text whose living is its reading. And, moreover, “every act of reading is an act of interpretation, performed according to the principle of the hermeneutical circle that would have us understand the parts through the whole and the whole through its parts, so we go on incessantly returning to the texts of our lives, revising, reinterpreting, and narrating again the story so often rehearsed, in the mind if not on paper”. 66 Olney observes that the main metaphoric expression that Augustine uses for the function of human cognition, and for the workings of the human mind in general, is “reciting a psalm”; this entails a certain model of containers which are “on either side of the activity, one holding expectation, the other memory”. 67 The Augustinian psalm appears as a virtual substitute for the idea of the text in general, the text of memory that characteristically structures the continuous narrative of life.

Taking into account recent theoretical writings on autobiography by Gusdorf and Olney, and, particularly, those of Lejeune, the Hungarian philologist István Dobos has made some interesting remarks about the various autobiographical genres and the author’s position and function in them. Dobos distinguishes autobiography

64 See: Ibid.
67 See Ibid.
from the closely related genres of memoir, diary and biography. According to him, what differentiates memoir-writing from the other literary genres “is that a memoir does not take one’s personal life for its subject matter, a diary is not necessarily characterized by a look back upon past events, while in the case of a biography, the author and the narrator is not the same person. However, a common feature shared by all these four genres is that they are not purely literary genres. The reason for this is that their authors are not automatically classified as *belletrists*”.

In autobiography, Dobos maintains, literary artistic creation is of secondary importance, “especially when compared with the psychological, historical, or other aspects at work. The genre presupposes at least three kinds of selves: the self of the author, the self of the autobiographical narrator, and the narrated autobiographical self”. Following Lejeune, Dobos elaborates on his notion of the “agreement” made in the autobiographical pact: “The most important condition and guarantee for this agreement is that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist should be fully identical”. Dobos observes that in order to comply “with the agreement”, the reader “is supposed to read the text as a reliable account of events that have actually happened, given by a real life, responsible person”. This conception may be also relevant for the reading of autobiographically-based “poetic diaries” of all sorts that indirectly tell the story of “real” events happened in the poet’s personal past. The first name that comes over in regard of the same context in Russian Life-creation is Aleksandr Blok, for as David Sloane once demonstrated, the entire narrated “persona” of Blok corresponded to his poetically depicted “biographical self” which he wanted to create with a new “biographical myth”.

One the one hand, as Dobos suggests, the unbound freedom of “fictitiousness in autobiographies” is somehow limited by the concreteness of the empirical facts which are narrated. On the other hand, as he pointedly remarks, there is always and inevitably a kind of durable uncertainty which he calls a “suspicion of fictitiousness”. This concrete kind of “reading” must always somehow position and relate itself to the main ideology of the voluntary “autobiographical pact”. Dobos remarks that “in the case of fiction, the text does not state that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are indeed identical. In this case, the reader, in opposition to the author, tries to establish similarities among them. As regards autobiography, the sameness of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist is clearly stated”. The only amplification one should consider here is the aspect of reader-response, which contributes to a better vision of the *universum* of the autobiographical text. As Dobos prefers to put it: “At the same time, the reader is inclined to find discrepancies (defects or distortions) among them [i.e., ‘the author, the narrator, and the protagonist’—D.I.]. That is to say, the perspectives of the author and that of the reader do not necessarily overlap”.

---

68 See Dobos 2005: 27.
70 See Ibid.
71 The scholar deals with the “mythologized biography” of this new biographical persona also known as “lyric hero”. See Sloane 1988: 108; see also Kraan 1994: 173-175.
72 See: Dobos 2005: 27.
73 See: Ibid.
Dobos contends that the notion of the “autobiographical pact” cannot really compel the reader to “accept the prescriptions of the text”, the “understandings” which emerge “from the common identity of the names”. After all, the critic asserts, “everything depends on what the reader decides to accept”. Speaking about life-writing in general, Dobos mentions one of the most wide-spread “stereotypes in autobiographical reading”, relevant to the “events which are not created by language but instead are immortalized as it were through the recording of the object of reminiscence or observation in the text”. Dobos maintains that in an autobiographical type of writing, “the role of language is constative rather than performative or productive, unlike in the case of fictional genres”. How exactly do the events evolve into a composition of a “life story”, and which perspective does this development entail? Dobos holds that “self-expression and self-interpretation” both constitute “an organic part of the autobiographical venture”. For him, it is “not incidental at all that, in the histories of the genre, one frequently encounters the metaphor of the mirror”.  

Dobos chooses to work with the Lacanian metaphor of the mirror, as it probably represents the best mechanism for analysis of the self (as it is also in Gusdorf). He does so in order to elucidate the implicit dialogism of autobiographical writing and to accentuate its complex and constantly “probing” narrative nature. The need for “reflection” – another person’s (the reader’s) pair of eyes – produces a physical resemblance to a mirror, justifying this comparison. The “speculative” nature of autobiography championed by the post-modernist theory of Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida garners its travestied “etymological” support in the term “speculum” – the Latin word for the reflecting surface. In this view, autobiography can actually be considered a writing genre that reflects and explores the spirituality of the self, and in which one’s life and behavior are as if “seen” through both the eyes of both the “scripter” whose life is being narrated and those of the outside reader who gradually achieves a virtual familiarity with the life depicted.

Dobos attempts to expand upon the important semiotic observations made by Roland Barthes regarding the textuality of a person and its involvement in the complex sign-object relationship between the author and his autobiographical text. The existence of the “undead” author (who has lived his life and is now speaking of it) should pose a particular problem for the postulated idea of this author’s alleged “death”. Dobos recalls that Barthes dealt with “the impossibility of establishing the foundation for the unity of the text that exists as fabric of languages”. For Barthes, however, an author will always remain to a certain extent fictitious, no matter how “real” he might have been. The same was true (as Dobos does not fail to acknowledge) for Michel Foucault and his choice to regard the “author’s name” as a mere “function” of the text.

Those “postmodernist” relativist views, according to Dobos, diminish the very “concept of the artist”, and the related “authorial personality”. The generally influential idea of the “self”, that which Dobos highlights as the distinct “narrating subject”, should be seen as the “central point of the autobiographical work”. The same self is destined, according to Dobos, to evolve into a “textualized sign”, making

---

75 See the most characteristic in this respect essay by de Man “Autobiography as defacement” (De Man 1984: 67-81).
autobiography not really distinguishable “from all other fictional texts”. The identity “of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist in autobiographies” presents a peculiar problem for Dobos. The main issue here relates to the general question of affinity, “between the reminiscing self and the recollected self”. According to the critic, “[one of the] essential guarantees of the authenticity of autobiographies is a distance between the two selves, as long as we accept that the human personality inevitably undergoes certain changes in the course of time”.76 The “two selves” of whom Dobos speaks suggest a potential split that may occur in all autobiographers’ personalities. After all, they have to write about their own existence using a “double vision”: the “writing body” is a unique essence that produces a testimony of its own being, from both inside and outside its physical boundaries. In this respect, one must not forget the evolving “transgressive” nature of any genuine “life-writing” as a genre and literary activity that steps beyond the boundaries established by nature.

The various theories of life-writing contain many aspects that are valuable for my description of Russian Lebenskunst. I can employ the suggestive notions of the synecdochical nature of autobiography and of its self-apologetic and even soteriological essence in order to discover the basis of the entire phenomenon. Olney’s ideas about the genre varieties of autobiography are very useful, and equally so is Dobos’ synthesis, which helps to establish a correct analytical path through the bewildering thicket of theories and interpretations of autobiography. Particularly interesting is the problem of the transformation of the “authorial personality” into the “autobiographical self”, which Dobos connects with Paul Ricoeur’s ideas about memory-writing. “One of the recurring questions” in the recent autobiographical scholarship, he observes, is concerned with “the issue of the authenticity and verifiability of autobiographical stories from the aspect of the world outside the text”.77

Dobos is clearly skeptical about the fact that any “verification of texts from the aspect of facts, even in the case of contemporary authors”, may be successfully carried out. He then uses Paul Ricoeur’s book Soi-même comme un autre (1990) which “can assist in further acceptance of a fact that there can hardly be a solid way for verifying the events that occur in one’s soul. The reference of spiritual events is available even for the person experiencing them as verbal reference and not as factuality prior to language”.78 The fictive and the actual are almost always “textually conditioned”.79

1.4. Paul John Eakin and the textuality of autobiographical self-positioning

Other useful theoretical ideas on the textuality of life-writing have been recently expressed by American literary scholar Paul John Eakin in his article “Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration” (2001). Eakin takes issue with Lejeune’s views on autobiography, and approaches autobiography “not as a literary genre but instead as an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation”. For Eakin,

---

76 See: Dobos 2005: 30.
77 See: Ibid.
78 See: Ibid: 31
79 See: Ibid.
published autobiographies tend to demonstrate “...only a small if revealing part of a much larger phenomenon, the self-narration we practice day in day out”. The critic suggests to replace the question of “what is expected of this text in order for it to ‘count’ as autobiography?” with another one of “what is expected of this individual, as manifested in this self-narration, for him or her to ‘count as’ a person?”.

Eakin insists upon a constant set of “regulations” that form the basis of the conclusive “identity” of any autobiographical narration. He argues that the main regulations relevant “for identity narrative function simultaneously as rules for identity, and the key to this hypothesis is the concept of narrative identity, which assumes that narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience” (italics added – D.I.). For Eakin, the important concept of “narrative identity” has the effect of “conceptualiz[ing] narrative as not merely about identity but rather in some profound way a constituent part of identity, specifically of the extended self that is expressed in self-narrations”.

In an attempt to decipher autobiographical genesis and development, Eakin refers to another researcher’s psychological understanding of what we might call the “memorizing self”. He mentions the psychologist Ulrich Neisser (1988: 35-59), who characterized the human “narrating self” as, primarily, the self of memory, as a kind of self which exists “continuously across time”. Eakin labels this entity as the “extended self” which comes into existence in close association with “autobiographical memory” and, as he notes, “the acquisition of narrative competence during a particularly rich phase of early childhood development”. During the initial period of life lasting from “two-and-a-half to four”, young children actually “are initiated into the narrative practices of their culture; they learn that they are expected to have and to display in narrative form a set of autobiographical memories”.

With reference to psychological understandings of autobiography, Eakin strives to define “the source of narrative identity” within the psychological approach of John Shotter, who argued that “we are disciplined to the practice of self-narration through a process of ... ‘social accountability’: ‘what we talk of as our experience of our reality is constituted for us very largely by the already established ways in which we must talk in our attempts to account for ourselves – and for it – to the others around us’”.

Eakin emphasizes the relevance of the autobiographical “way of thinking” (which, he says, has a sort of psychological, therapeutical value) to any self-oriented human endeavor. By way of composing autobiographical text “we learn the rules” which enable us to talk “about ourselves”; as grown-up people, Eakin holds, “we continue to be called to account for our self-narrations”. The autobiographical writer is supposed to “tell the truth”, which constitutes one of the most ingrained rules which “we associate with autobiographical discourse”, according to Eakin. He understands autobiography as a “literary genre” which has a “feature of truth-telling” understood to be its “ultimate criterion”. Eakin believes that Elizabeth Bruss “made
truth-value the centerpiece of her analysis of the autobiographical act”. For Eakin, autobiography’s narrative rules “also function as identity rules, and ... when they do, the rule-defined entity shifts from text to person”. This latter observation is of particular value for Lebenskunst research, because of its preoccupation with the mechanisms of transformation from the realm of aesthetics (i.e., the autobiographical text) to that of physical “life” (i.e., the autobiographical “person”).

Since many of the Russian memoirs and diaries that I use in my discussion of Modernist Lebenskunst contain more or less explicit erotic material, the question arises whether it is ethically acceptable to publish “compromising” information about the past of a person. Eakin speaks of writers who “break the second rule constraining the practice of self-narration”: for him this rule is “respect for the privacy of others” while one is engaged in the task of telling the empirical truth of the past. The existence of “privacy rights” may, according to Eakin, “be at odds with telling the truth–indeed, with telling one’s story at all. And since we insist on telling our stories, I suspect that most of us break this rule of privacy almost every day, for as Philippe Lejeune reminds us, ‘private life is almost always a co-property’ (Moi aussi ...)”.

With both of the scholars one can agree that “autobiography involves inescapably the display of privacy”, and, accordingly, “autobiographers lead perilous lives, morally speaking, whether they like it or not”.

1.5. Approaches to the theoretical study of diaries, memoirs and related writing: some characteristic examples of recent scholarship

Howard H. Keller formulated several useful definitions that provide me with a good conceptual framework to approach Russian modernist autobiographical memory. A fitting case for study in this respect is Vladimir Nabokov, with his playful poetics of memory. Keller asserts that the various uses of human memory always constitute “major concerns of literary autobiography”. Therefore, the most influential and “successful” Russian autobiographies reveal for him both “great concern with the process of inserting information into the memory store for later retrieval” and all the things related to the operation of memory in general: “processes of memory, forgetting, memory control, memory clarity, and accuracy of recall”. The scholar believes that there is “a great deal of reflection on the part of Tolstoy, Pasternak, Mandelstam, and Nabokov concerning how memory works. Nabokov even goes to the extreme of personifying Memory in the English title of his autobiography, Speak, Memory”.

Keller analytically scrutinizes Nabokov’s mnemonic and self-writing techniques in order to examine closely the writer’s analytical principia and synthesis describing the intimate process of the internal mental image-origin. A universal principle of “mnemonics”, he believes, is founded on a sort of a constructive paradox: “larger memory traces are easier to recall than smaller traces. The clinical explanation of this paradox is that probe information is put into [short-term] memory in order to

---

87 See: Ibid.
88 See: Eakin 2001: 118.
89 See: Keller 1982: 79.
call up a particular memory... Nabokov alludes specifically to this process in Speak, Memory: ‘And now a delightful thing happens. The process of recreating that penholder and the microcosm in its eyelet stimulates my memory to a last effort’.”

The understating of the same “memory-stimulation” mechanism was relevant to some other Russian “recollecting modernists”, particularly, Andrei Belyi. This textually prolific “stimulation” of memory was in some cases creating “simulations of truth” so far as the evidence presented by Belyi was not really corroborated by any other independent source.

In recent years, Russian diaries and memoirs have drawn much scholarly attention. Most recently, Irina Paperno, in a special issue of The Russian Review devoted to the memoir, has given an account that probes the very essence of this tricky autobiographical genre of “diary”. Her essay, entitled “What can be done with diaries?”, gives much useful information on the limits and advantages that the life-writings present to a scholar of Russian culture. Like the earlier-quoted autobiography theorists, Paperno is preoccupied with defining the place of the diary as a genre: “The diary, as an uncertain genre uneasily balanced between literary and historical writing, between the spontaneity of reportage and reflectiveness of the crafted text, between selfhood and events, between subjectivity and objectivity, between the private and the public, constantly disturbs attempts to summarize its characteristics within formalized boundaries”.

For Paperno, the diary has been “both condemned to exclusion from analysis as a specific genre and privileged for its ability to reveal the tension between the opposites and to highlight marginality. Yet, over the years, scholars have read, and used, diaries as a historical testimony, a literary form, or an autobiographical document”. The term “genre” she uses “in the broad, Bakhtinian sense” that was not “limited to the belles lettres: as a complex form that shapes the representation of experience into a whole. There is no consensus about the definition”.

Paperno elaborates on her thesis, observing a particular evasiveness in this self-reflecting mode of writing: “Many focus on the ‘elastic’ nature of this genre, its ‘hybridity and diversity’: the diary takes a variety of shapes, often incorporating other genres; the diary has a capacity to include diverse materials; the diary is put to different uses (serial autobiography, chronicle of current events, and so on). As one self-conscious diarist put it, the diary is a ‘capacious-hold-all’.”

Paperno quotes from a comment made by K. Eckhard Kuhn-Osius, who reflects analytically on the very nature of the diary, starting with its name: “It is very difficult to say anything about diaries which will be true for all of them”. Expanding on this, Paperno deals with “a distinct narrative form” that according to her “writers and readers alike associate with the word ‘diary’”. She then, meaningfully takes “a cue from its name, English ‘diary’, or ‘journal’, German ‘Tagebuch’, French ‘journal’ (or ‘journal intime’), and Russian ‘dnevnik’ are all derived from the root meaning...

---

90 See: Keller 1982: 82-83.
92 See: Ibid.
96 See: Paperno 2004: 562
‘day’. Notwithstanding the diversity and variability of its form, the diary is committed to the narration of calendar, day after day”.97

Paperno stresses the importance of the real “circumstances of writing” which underlie the life of the diary as a “genre”. According to her, the diary must necessarily entail “the first-person narrative” which highlights “the diary’s special relationship to privacy, intimacy, and secrecy”. The scholar believes that “in terms of their genesis, diaries have been connected to chronicles and annals as well as personal and household account books”.98

Attempting to pin down the fundamental nature of the diary in terms of genre, Paperno observes a technical functionality in the diary, and emphasizes the importance of recognizing the multiple identities involved in its writing. She uses a definition formulated by Lawrence Rosenwald, who suggested understanding a certain “literary form” a diary when its writer “uses it to fulfill certain functions”. Rosenwald then proposed to name these “functions collectively as the discontinuous recording of the aspects of the writer’s own life; more technically we must posit a number of identities: between the author and the narrator; between the narrator and the principal character; and between the depicted and the real, this latter including the identity between date of entry and date of composition”.99

The “psychology” of the memoirist or diary writer turns to be highly relevant to this approach to autobiographical writing, which stresses the overall individualism underlying each diary-like work. According to the point of view offered by Paperno, the modern diary “has been described in terms of its significance in the individual psychological and general philosophical sense: used to account for one’s time, the diary stems from the fear of watching life grow shorter with each passing day. Moreover, as it turns life into text, the diary represents a lasting trace of one’s being – an effective defense against annihilation. In this sense, diarists use the ‘account book’ and, broader, the ‘book of (my) life’ as the governing metaphors of diary-writing”.100 Paperno apporves a well-established view according to which the diary “flourished in the ages and cultures concerned with the individual. For scholars working with diaries this means dealing not only with individuality but also with specific individuals”.101 This important stress upon the “individual” and “private” experience rather than on collective/communal one was very much relevant to the life-creationist intentions and practices of Russian Modernism as such.

Paperno apparently prefers to stress the important notion of a communicative function imbedded into diary-like fiction. The resulting cultural “dialogism” reminds us of the Bakhtinian understanding of every historical act of writing. In this cultural-semiotic wake, she argues that any diary will operate “as a form of communication – by mediating between the private and the public”. The Berkeley scholar proceeds with a quotation from another critic, observing that “while the experience itself in its

97 See: Ibid.
98 See: Ibid.
99 Quoted via Paperno 2004: 562. See: Rosenwald 1988: 5-6. Paperno remarks in her article that “Rosenwald’s definition is meant to exclude the neighboring genres, such as memoir and autobiography, letter and correspondence, and fictitious diary (or diary-novel)”. See Paperno 2004: 562.
privacy is speechless, the very act of writing drags it into the public realm”. She argues that from the original “apprehension of experience by the diarist in the very act of writing (and in subsequent reading) to the potential publication for reading by others, the diary externalizes and objectifies the inner, socializes and historicizes the intimate, essentially working as the archive of the intimate”.

The Berkeley scholar insisted also that the “value of the published diary largely stems from presumed privacy”.

The paradoxical nature of the diary does not go unnoticed by the critic. She deals with the ultimate communicative problem that results from the dual nature of the diary-text: its inward vector (the diarist himself and his individualistic conscience that produces life-writing through introspection) versus the outward one (the potential audience that may gain access to this text through subsequent publication). In her reflections, we may notice an intention to point out an original “matrix” in life-writing when she mentions the “communicative situation” of the diary that according to her “rests on a paradox”. This paradox is represented in “the coexistence of the presumption of privacy (the diary as a text not addressed to anyone but the diarist) and the violation of privacy”. So far as the genre of diary “negotiates the relationship between the categories of temporality and subjectivity, as well as the private-public”, it also “creates a generic matrix for recounting personal experience in historical and social context”. In this way, in the view of the scholar “the diary can be said to create a space for ‘the intimate theater of history’”.

According to Paperno, this “diary matrix” may uncover “a number of tensions that ultimately reflect on the disjunction between living and writing: the rift between a single and changing, or incremental, self; the paradox of privacy and writing; the concurrence of the impulse to leave a record and realization of the inadequacy”. It is by all means crucial to underline this kind of generic primeval discrepancy that all the diaries share together: the privacy ↔ public. This “inadequacy” creates a rather ambivalent continuum of existence. The strictly “private” nature of the proposed writing convinces the reader to “believe” in diary, but the openly “public way” of its circulation undermines the authenticity of its “private” and supposedly intimate creation.

Paperno also suggests a specific analytical technique used for dealing with a standard literary diary in order to read it properly and responsibly. The diary, should be perceived not just as a book with a beginning and end, but, rather, as “a process” of analytical and meditative understanding. We should not ask according to her “what can be learned from the text of the diary”, but, rather, what can be learned “from the individual diarist’s work of recounting his/her life, in private, on a continuous basis within a calendar grid”. How to read a diary, and what to do with diaries and other intimate writings cannot be shown in “yet another survey, or in an as-of-yet nonexistent theoretical work...”.

---

102 See: Ibid.
103 See: Ibid.: 572.
104 Irina Paperno’s remark: “John Randolph’s phrase”.
105 See: Paperno 2004: 571.
107 See: Ibid.
Another recent publication that has dealt explicitly with the autobiographical and diaries-like modes of writing is Beth Holmgren’s collection of papers. This collection illustrates the perplexing boundaries between what is considered “personal fiction” and what is understood as real “history” when the genres of autobiography and memoir are closely examined. Holmgren notes that modern theory approaches memoir writing as a principally “undefined” sort of genre. She observes that “the memoir may be filtered through the most idiosyncratic subject and as eccentrically narrated, elaborately plotted and symbol packed as any work of fiction, but the memoirist is nevertheless bound to worldly reference”. The difference between the two close genres of life-writing may be contained, in the “non-similarity” of the modulation which employs exposed descriptions of the “narrated self” in the cases of both autobiography and memoir. The self-declared “ordinariness” of the “average autobiography”, as distinguished from the more openly self-conscious memoir, may be just a misleading pose; but if there is a defining feature of the memoir, it is most likely found in the dependence of its author on some preexistent empirical “orders” to which he should remain faithful in one form or another.

Holmgren uses her expanded editorial introduction in order to meditate on an important fundamental question which might be plainly formulated as: Why did Russians write so many memoirs, and why did the aims of these memoirists change so considerably in the course of nearly three centuries? Although theoretically interesting, Holmgren’s book lies rather beyond my “period”, since it is more focused on later exemplars of Russian memoirs, notably those of Lidia Ginzburg.

For a detailed bibliography of Russian autobiographical writing – diaries combined with memoirs – see Petr Zaionchkovskii’s compendium, “The history of pre-Revolutionary Russia in diaries, memoirs, and reminiscences. Annotated index in 5 volumes” (“История дореволюционной России в дневниках и воспоминаниях. Аннотированный указатель в 5ти томах”), published from 1976 through 1989.

2.0. Western canonical texts responsible for the formation of the “confession genre”

2.1. The role of memorized life-narrative in Augustine’s Confessions

As it was already briefly stated earlier, the two influential names that are largely “responsible” for the formation of the narrative strategies of Western memoir-oriented literary discourse, and hence for establishing the story-telling genre of “confessions”, are St. Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

With the intention of delineating the Augustinian views on narrative of memory, James Olney starts by formulating the three observable ‘types of memory’ that can be found in the oeuvre of St. Augustine, not forgetting the ever-fascinating point of the refined “memorized reciting of psalms”, which the scholar believes to be an essential technique, one that serves as a good illustration of the very essence of early-medieval

\[\text{See: Holmgren 2003.}\]
\[\text{See: Holmgren 2003: xiii.}\]
\[\text{See: Зайончковский 1976-1989.}\]
(e.g., Augustinian) ideas of perfect memory. Olney holds that “it is necessary” to differentiate several types of active uses of memory in the writings of St. Augustine. One of these is “rote memory”, which is understood through the prism of “memorizing” something. Olney typifies this with a psalm, which, if we know it “by heart”, “we can bring it out in perfect, unchanged order whenever we like”. The second type of memory Olney notes is the way we recollect our empirical experiences “that have come to us through our various senses”. With the assistance of this kind of memory “we can consciously return to [an experience], call [it] up, and then store [it] away once again”. In this type of memory, “the probability of change in the contents of memory is much greater than in rote memory”. The remaining, third type of memory is a “more profound depth of our memory… that principal memory that neither partakes of the mechanics of rote memory, nor depends on the external world for sensory input and nourishment, but instead looks to an internal world and comes to be shaped, in large part, by what psychologists would now term a ‘self-schema’”.

Olney specifies his reasons for introducing this discussion on St. Augustine’s types of memory, speculating that these three kinds of memory can be perceived “as lying along a continuum from the fixed, ordered, and unalterable at the end of rote memory to the inventive, plastic, and always-in-process at the end of principal memory”. Olney emphasizes that all these differentiated types of memory could be conceived of as a “continuum with no absolute divisions separating one from another as to function in the psychology of memory”. He observes that when St. Augustine recites a psalm “for the fiftieth time it is going to be different, however slightly, however subtly, from the forty-ninth time, not to say from the first time and precisely, in part, because there has been a forty-ninth time and a first time and all the times in between”.

According to Olney, the memory in Augustine’s religious philosophy was perceived as a well-bounded theoretical “continuum”, which required a focused attitude from anyone interested in the genuine mastery of its hidden realms of remembering: “At the far end of the continuum, those more free-floating creations of principal memory are not creations out of nothing – only God, in Augustine, creates out of nothing – but are shaped according to a self already largely formed from memorial acts earlier in time and further back on the continuum”.

In agreement with the view articulated by Olney, which I will borrow for my own subsequent “reading” of Russian memoirs and general methodological attitude, the idea of “narrating” (narratio) was central to the European early literary canon. It was particularly popular with the nascent medieval philosophy and intellectual life represented in the texts of Augustine. For him “memory” is almost identical with narration: “Augustine’s narrative has a will of its own and a memory that can do no other than conform itself to that narrative will. I don’t think we need to suppose that Augustine consciously changed – added or deleted – anything in his Confessions account”.

---

112 See: Ibid.
There is a remarkable similarity between a “corporeal” species, purposely organized around the issue of memory (which had already been noticed by the Church Father) and the very idea of “narration” at its most basic – assembling disparate parts into “the whole” (of a story). The capacity of memory is the unique God-given trait that reinforces our humanity (as opposed to animals that presumably lack this capacity for memory).

Meditating on the role of memory, Olney finds it remarkable that Augustine’s observations extend “from animals, which have, as it were, no memory of memory”, to the animals in us that can perform mental, memorial operations on “corporeal things”, finally to the higher (or lower: the “more profound depth of our memory”) capacity of our “principal memory” that combines “imaginary visions by taking pieces of recollection from here and there and, as it were, sewing them together into a story”. Honing in on Augustine’s words about “[T]aking pieces of recollection from here and there and ... sewing them together”, Olney concedes that “this is the operation of memory certainly,” but wonders whether it might also be “a complex act of textual weaving, of narration and the simultaneous interpretation and reinterpretation of the narrative produced”.

Olney’s hermeneutical interest is to construct a well-wrought theoretical system in which the veracity of proper interpretation can be responsible for the relevant memory constructs. In light of this, Olney repeatedly emphasizes the interpenetration of the interpretative mode of almost any intellectual narration and the Augustinian philosophy of memory. He reminds us that, according to Augustine (in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*), “different visions” of things and matters may be contained “in one and the same soul”. This suggests to Olney the grounds for ‘interpretation’, both literal and figurative, of scriptural narrative or indeed any narrative but he cautions that “we must not imagine that there is no intercourse between these different visions, even though they be ordered in a hierarchy of inferior and superior”. The scholar presupposes that the mental faculty of memory is ready to apprehend all the possible manifestations of the empirical and higher levels of reality. To highlight this process of mental recognition, Olney again analytically quotes Augustine: “[the soul] perceives objects such as the corporeal heaven and earth and everything that can be known in them in the degree that they are capable of being known; with the spirit it sees likenesses of bodies...; and with the mind it understands those realities that are neither bodies nor likenesses of bodies. But there is, of course, a hierarchy in these visions, one being superior to another. For spiritual vision is more excellent than corporeal and intellectual vision more excellent than spiritual.”

Olney proceeds with a detailed epistemological discussion about the mental nature that the knowledge of memory projects upon its bearer. He contends that he “said relatively little” on the broad topic of the general human ability of cognition when debating the issue of memory, “shading off” as he says, “into hermeneutics”. The reason for that relates to his “Augustinian” view of things and his original

---

117 See Ibid.
subscription to Augustine’s system of views. Olney admits that the peculiar relation of memory and knowledge in Augustine may be interesting to mention, because “it bears very significantly on the issue of interpretation and how adequate our powers of understanding and interpretation are to what we know or would know. Augustine has been discussing the question of the knowledge we may have of God, saying that we can, in fact, have some knowledge of God, ‘yet that knowledge is less than he, because it is in a lower nature; for the mind is creature, but God is Creator’”).

The compound self-reflective qualities of memoir-narrative are, in accordance with Olney’s view of Augustine, a fundamental aspect of this epistemological approach: “What then, of the mind’s knowledge of itself? [Augustine says:] ‘We conclude ... that, when the mind knows itself and approves what it knows, this same knowledge is in such way its word, that it is wholly and entirely on a par with it, is equal to, and is identical with it, because it is not the knowledge of a lower essence, such as the body, nor of a higher essence such as God’”). Olney addresses the question “where does a mind discover itself and know itself except in memory?”. He then proceeds to answer it with the same interest to medieval intellectual legacy which offers numerous possibilities of original insight into that topic: “as Mary Carruthers points out in the afterword to her fine Book of Memory, throughout the Middle Ages all human learning was taken to be ‘memorative in nature’, and so too it must be of the mind’s knowing of itself”.

---

120 See: Ibid.
121 See: Olney 1998: 67. The ancient “art of memory” as we know it sought to articulate certain memorial abilities through a relatively obscure mental technique of impressing and “keeping in mind” some specific “loci” and “images” to be later available for the so-called “memory store-grounds”. Much additional material on this can be found in the work of Mary Carruthers, The Book of Memory: a Study of Memory in Medieval Culture (Carruthers 1992). Frances Yates has already shown that the manipulation of images in memory must involve the work of the human psyche as a whole. (See Yates 1966: preface.) Vico considered memory as one faculty with three distinguishable arch-aspects: 1) simple remembering, 2) altering or imitating – imagination, and 3) giving things a new aspect by putting them in proper arrangements, i.e., ingenuity or invention. As Yates demonstrated, during the Renaissance the Italian humanists and neo-Platonists at times erected symbolical “virtual temples of memory”, memory theaters, metaphorical “spaces of thought”, and other storage-spaces of knowledge for the “collected wisdom” of their time, where many and various theoretically infinite associations between objects and memory locations could be combined and conceived. Mental, imaginary navigation through these spaces also facilitated combinatory processes: “ars combinatoria” was the intellectually productive principle of those memory theaters, for example the most famous— that of Giulio Camillo (Giulio Camillo, L’Idea del Teatro, Florence, 1550; see all the necessary details in Yates 1966). In 1929, Aby Warburg stressed the intellectual, awareness-enhancing “power of mental distance” and even included this “original act of human civilization” in the introduction to his Mnemosyne-Atlas. During the final years of his life, Warburg studied the role memory and “mnemotechnics” play in the development of our intellectual civilization. This reflective fascination resulted in an image “atlas”, called Mnemosyne, consisting of forty large canvases to which almost 1000 images were affixed. Warburg chose that format in order to represent symbolically/ graphically the relationships between “mental images”. See: Warburg 2003. The powerful uses of spatiality rise as an important facet of Warburg’s “ars mnemonica”, which pondered the mnemonic uses of space—a spatial mnemonic system. For additional details, see the web-resource entirely devoted to this project: http://www.mnemosyne.org/studienausgabe/atlas .
2.2. The various intra-textual positions of the “main narrator” in the texts of Rousseau (Confessions and Dialogues)

Olney comments on the possible scholarly correctness of the understanding of any writer who chooses to work in the tricky genre of “confession”.\textsuperscript{122} Our analytical judgment depends on grasping the distance the writer deliberately takes from his “audience”. It is essential to be able to see whether the “public” was originally included in the writer’s intention. The “genuine” confession was supposed to be hermetical and have only the God or the confidential priest to be its exclusive “listening” targets.

Olney gains his understanding of this genre from its first authors, and especially from St. Augustine. Rousseau’s passionate and world-famous Confessions is perceived as a natural extension of the intimately “revealing self”. Together with Olney one may trace Rousseau’s work to the early examples of European literary confessions. It was also important to stress the influence of this French author on the subsequent literary traditions. Moreover, Olney also proposed his set of arguments, proving Rousseau’s Confessions to be “the prototypical Modernist Autobiography”.\textsuperscript{123} The central problem that arises in any in-depth analytical reading of this text is that of the author and his concealed narrative strategies. How does the writer portray his own image in this intimate autobiographical diary? What grounds does he choose to illustrate and represent (or “re-present”) the figure that he presents? James Olney proposed to address all these issues using the example of the “classic” confessional text by Rousseau.

The scholar suggestively quotes from “the preamble to the preamble” to the start of Rousseau’s narrative where we read: “Here is the sole portrait of man, painted exactly according to nature and true in every detail that exists and, probably, will ever exist”\textsuperscript{124}. This way of ironic “defamiliarization”, estrangement from his own writing self was, as Olney emphasizes, a very characteristic narrative feature introduced and invented by Rousseau. In agreement with that, Rousseau usually perceived himself, his personal existential and historic experience, abilities of his memory as virtually “unique”. Stressing this extraordinary “singularity” Olney quoted from the studied author: “I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world”\textsuperscript{125}. Apart from feeling himself so painfully different from all the surrounding “public” Rousseau used his attitude in order to create additional artificial distance between the narrating subject and the depicted matter itself – to strengthen the illusion of truth established in the eyes of the faithful reader. (As if the story told was actually “seen” by a second “objective” person).

Following Olney’s view, we can also see that Rousseau’s introductory preamble contains many indispensable features that contribute to our better understanding of Rousseau’s overall authorial intention and of his dissatisfaction with

\textsuperscript{122} On this difficult genre see some interesting contributions in Collins, Power 1987; see also, most recently a good comparative survey by Chloe Taylor (2009). See also for the Russian sources: Уваров 1998.
\textsuperscript{123} See: Olney 1998: 150.
\textsuperscript{124} See: Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} See: Olney 1998: 114
his original errant human nature. The main concern of Rousseau, according to Olney was to try to communicate his “sins” to the very same public, to the entire mankind that was suffering from the same condition of imperfect being, of unfortunate remoteness from the blissful “nature”\textsuperscript{126} The author intended to make his private memory accessible to the others by means of his literary creation. That task as Rousseau understood it was far from very easy.

Olney dealt with the problem of the “narrative language” which might be specifically created for the corresponding type of confessional “memory-communication” de-facto used by Rousseau. The major issue here was linked to the immense distance which existed between the writing consciousness of the author and his supposed target-public. Rousseau always doubted whether he might be adequately understood by his peers, so long as they, not like him did not openly acknowledge their original corrupted essence, their “primordial sin” of being away from the simple and perfect “nature. Olney tried to enter Rousseau’s mind and formulated the relevant question on how exactly it would be possible to “bridge the chasm between ‘moi seul’, myself alone, as Rousseau proudly, frequently and pathetically proclaims himself to be, and all the others”\textsuperscript{127} There was no clear-cut and ready answer offered for that major dilemma.

The “confessional mode” dictates its own projection that is cast upon the image of the narrator – that is, upon the reader’s key to gain the correct understanding of the text as a whole. How does Rousseau manage communication with “the other” via his writing? Olney describes how Rousseau himself came to be realized as that curious and unique Other, with respect to the attitudes of the audience of his contemporary readers. As the scholar observes: “in the Neuchâtel preamble Rousseau takes it on himself to be ‘un autre’ ... for all of humankind; in effect he will become, if his effort succeeds, ‘the other’ for everyone else. He will be the one everyone knows best and least; others will know everything about him, because he will tell everything – the good, the bad, everything (“Je serai vrai; je le serai sans réserve; je dirai tout; le bien, le mal, tout enfin’...”\textsuperscript{128} Despite this obvious immense effort of the author, Olney suggested that deep inside his mind Rousseau was absolutely sure that his confession will eventually remain an annoying “puzzle”, since it will not be truly understood by the public as far as “they” do not belong to the very same “species” as he did.

According to the point of view advocated by Olney, this well-cultivated exceptional “singulariness” of Rousseau-the-writer served him well in his desire to construct a fine didactic example of how life must not be conducted; therefore, being both “useful” and “uncommon” helped him formulate his case: “What Rousseau insisted on more than once – and here his paradoxes become confused and irresolvable contradictions – was that his work was to be both (and simultaneously and equally) ‘unique et utile’ (unique and useful)”\textsuperscript{129} Summarizing this point, Olney observes that the quoted preamble to the Neuchâtel manuscript in general proclaims Rousseau’s “unsurpassed” universal uniqueness. According to this attitude, the author believed that there was no any other

\textsuperscript{126} See: Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} See: Olney 1998: 114.
\textsuperscript{128} See: Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} See: Ibid.
way for an author to succeed, if his memorized narrative will not claim for that singular oneness. With Rousseau we are convinced that "it is certain then if I accomplish successfully what I have undertaken I will have done something unique and useful...". Bolstering this argument Olney observes: "in the note prefixed to the Geneva manuscript Rousseau refers to the Confessions simply as "un ouvrage unique et utile". Personal memory of the intimately "speaking self" must be always, therefore, obviously exceptional and in principle un-forgeable attracting the reader by the power of its overall explicit uniqueness.

It appears that Olney was one of the first contemporary Western scholars to raise the issue of Rousseau’s creative and imaginative “instability” as an author and to note his ambiguous methods of describing his first-name characters. This brings up the complex agenda of the characteristic Lebenskunst which presents the notion of “author-as-personage”, and the fragmentary merger of autobiographical writing with an invented literary fiction. As Olney observes: “[this is a] situation of complete ontological instability for characters, narrators, and authors, which is deliberately created and extreme in the Dialogues, is not unknown to the Confessions, and I think we would do well to take it up there first, where it is a relatively simpler matter, before giving ourselves over unprepared to the snares and tangles of the Dialogues”.

The problem of the authorial identity arises then as a paramount one, demanding its focalized resolution in this way or another. “In ‘Ici commence’” tells Olney, “I have referred (as is conventional when discussing what one takes to be autobiography) to the author, the narrator, and the protagonist of the Confessions by a single name, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, with neither quotation marks nor any other sign to suggest that there is anything other than a shared identity among the three, and also with no suggestion that any of the three is a consciously designed fiction”. For the scholar, therefore the point of determining the “real” identity of the formal narrator of the text of the Confession is left conceptually unresolved. The question of what “kind” of Rousseau was to be held “responsible for his ‘sins’” and his resulting text remained as we see, more or less open.

A central question, therefore, which may be somehow distinct from the scholarly deconstruction of the Confessions that Olney undertakes, is the problem of the authorial “narrator’s voice” and identity: despite many years of close reading and research, this still remains rather obscure been, perhaps not a readily subject to a final and clear-cut answer. Of which “Rousseau” should we think, in any case? For, as we know, many times the author plays games with us, taking upon himself some other, out-of-character identities, entering the realms of mystification and carnivalesque ludism.

Olney analytically observes this strange perplexing condition of authorship and focuses his investigation on the issues of “narration” and the different acting “voices”; he suggests, moreover, that “in discussing the Confessions it might be strategically advisable to abandon use of the name ‘Rousseau’”. Olney proposes to speak instead, in the narratological fashion, “only of a narrator or a narrative voice”.

---

131 See: Ibid.
The main reason for doing this, he says, is to try to avoid the unnecessary "personalism" in writing about that 'bad man', Jean-Jacques Rousseau" and thereby to distance oneself from any form of evaluative judgment.

At the same time, Olney admits that employing the "device of impersonalizing and textualizing" may also introduce "some very troubling issues" that will complicate our understanding of the authorial image in Rousseau even further. As the critic contests, one of these issues, as it was proposed by Philippe Lejeune, is the one "of the coincidence", "in autobiography and especially in autobiography as practiced by Rousseau, of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist -- they are all three together, Lejeune and others would say, one and the same in autobiography, and without this coincidence what we are looking at is, generically speaking, not autobiography".

This whole issue of determining the proper authorial identity remains relevant not only to the text of the *Confessions*, but, as Olney demonstrates, to the closely related autobiographical and self-reflective *Dialogues*, and, to a lesser degree, for *Emile*, which is a thinly-veiled polemic and contest with Rousseau’s frequent "competitor", Montaigne. All these textual examples of self-writing raise issues of identity doubles, stylistic playfulness, and a multi-mirrored image that is reflected in the looking-glass of autobiographical prose.

Speaking of "splitting" as a kind of "gesture" which happens in the *Dialogues*, Olney argues that Rousseau as author somehow "projects himself as a character into the figure of the tutor, 'Jean-Jacques', responsible in *Emile* for executing the educational ideas that would make his charge, as Rousseau thought, an exemplary citizen of the world". The critic points out several cases of what he links to an authorial "crisis of identity" and calls existential "doubling", when, as he points, Rousseau states in the "Neuchâtel preamble to the *Confessions*, a kind of Montaignesque doubling (although Rousseau neglects to name his famous predecessor), that not only does not militate against singleness of being but on the contrary, he claims, positively reinforces the integral oneness of his own being and his writing. … [H]e intends to produce in his *Confessions* a portrait and not a book; …Rousseau continues the portrait-painting analogy by the likeness that he seeks in his self-portrait [which] will be more stylistic than referential".

Olney uses a brief exposition on the subject of Rousseau’s individualistic "memorized narrative" in the *Confessions* as a basis for the more general characterization regarding this classic, conventionally accepted autobiographical text of semi-fiction and the ambivalent figure of the author who became a self-drawn character. We deal here with the complex question of what really makes an exercise of written self-reflection become an accomplished successful autobiography. The main "nature" of any kind of properly constructed autobiographical narrative will be related to the ability "to render a doubled self-portrait", implemented "both in the events narrated and in the style of narration". This fascinating "doubling", "takes

---

134 See: Ibid.
136 See: Ibid.
on a new, a much greater and an often darker, significance in the *Dialogues*, where it is on the one hand so profligate and on the other hand so uncertain of control and intent*. Rousseau’s *Dialogues* does not present in itself an ordinary memorized “narrative text”, and therefore “the issue of doubling through style and reference is not so obviously ‘germane’”. According to this approach, “memory” in fact as the scholar observes, plays only small “direct role” in the *Dialogues*. As we see, “events are all *too much present* and swarming all over Rousseau in that text, so that there is little reflecting back and forth between a present and a past self as there is in, say, Augustine’s *Confessions* or Montaigne’s *Essais* ... or, in a slightly different way, in Rousseau’s own *Confessions*.138

The much-quoted autobiographical text of Rousseau’s *Dialogues* offers another opportunity to refine our scholarly view on the mixed identity of Rousseau-the-autobiographer who overturns the “grand narrative” of his life-writing and subjects it to the artificial didactic ideology of the early Enlightenment. Utopian conceptions of an “ideal world”, according to Olney, never ceased to occupy Rousseau’s mind; in fact, this ideology contributed to intensifying the subversive fracture of the author’s reflected identity. As the scholar remarks, “the *Dialogues* begins in full flow with ‘Rousseau’ exclaiming in disbelief what he has just heard from ‘the Frenchman’ about the diabolical evil of the ‘Author’ who is to be known between the two of them as ‘J.-J.’ and ‘Rousseau’, who has read the writings ascribed to ‘J. -J.’, refuses to accept that the man described by ‘the Frenchman’ as a monster of hypocrisy, depravity, and misanthropy can be the same as the man who produced the books; hence, a bit later he will posit two different individual *fils* dividing ‘J.-J.’, who has already been split off from ‘Rousseau’ (or is it from Rousseau?), in two”.139 We may here again ascertain the ultimate significance of the analytical attention given to the “chosen” “identity” of the “self-named” author of any reminiscing text, of any work of writing that centers around the “speaking I”.

3.0. The development of the “confession” genre in Russian literary history

3.1. Brief notes on the poetics of Tolstoy’s “Confession”: self-revelation or artificial ideology?

In his article “On the Poetics of Tolstoy’s *Confession*”, David Matual formulated some interesting ideas about the poetics of memorized fiction that come very close to being applicable to the earlier described materials of St. Augustine and Rousseau.140 Similarly to Rousseau-as-composer, Matual suggests, Tolstoy detects the importance of musical arrangements for the eventual success of his literary endeavor. The topic of religion becomes, as usual with Tolstoy, crucially important. There may be observed a sense of formal “musicality” in this sort of writing, which is related to the

---

137 See: Ibid.
138 See: Ibid. (Italics are mine – D.I.)
139 See: Ibid.
140 For a general survey that places Tolstoy in a corresponding literary tradition see also Salaman 1973.
perplexed religiosity of its famous author. Thematic development in the *Confession* may be particularly compared to that of the “sonata form in music”. As the critic shows, already in the opening chapter Tolstoy openly “states his major themes, which are fully developed and frequently recapitulated in subsequent chapters. The first of these principal themes is the loss and rediscovery of religious faith”.141

Mutual also maintains that there is a natural link between Tolstoy and St. Augustine. Tolstoy does exactly as St. Augustine did when he permits the praise of others in order to undermine the overwhelming and universal goodness which is characterized as “inherent in early childhood”. Tolstoy’s “degradation”, however, “proceeds from passions to crimes to writing – all with the constant encouragement first of his elders and then of his contemporaries”.142 The critic contends that further developing the existential theme of the “loss and recovery of faith”, Tolstoy understood that he was losing his own real inner “esteem” in proportion of increasing of his “great fame” as an author. Using the befitting genre of “confession” Tolstoy keenly strived to inform his readers with all the void of his intimate biographical downfalls that he continuously struggled with. The confessional genre offered Tolstoy additional useful possibilities to meditate on his inner “self” and the variety of his committed personal “crimes”.

Mutual illustrates to what extent similar Tolstoy’s writing was to the common self-reflective mode of composing which was introduced in the “modern” literature by Rousseau. The French author, too, demonstrated “how a man can become evil and unjust in his actions without losing his love of virtue”. And, “it is precisely such latent noble sentiments which rescue Tolstoy from his spiritual impasse, deliver him from his inconclusive ruminations, and enable him to accept the faith of the Russian people as the answer to his dilemma. To Tolstoy, this faith is an ‘irrational knowledge’, which makes life possible despite the hopeless conclusions of the philosophers”.143

As a matter of fact, throughout the text of his “confession” Tolstoy makes clear reference to the highly personalized, self-descriptive, and, above all, *autobiographical* character of his text, which was obvious enough for the sympathetic readers of his time. By enforcing this highly “personal” impression the reader meets with the figure of the “man lost in a forest” and many other corresponding “allusions” that relate to Tolstoy’s “biological” age at the time of his spiritual quests. As the critic noticed that was the symbolical “age of fifty”, the age of the biographical crossroad. The moment of age was paramountly important for this confessional narrative as Tolstoy in principle may have described himself “as a man lost in a forest in the middle of his life”.144 The traditional trope of comparing life to a forest is well known in the world literature.

---

142 See: Ibid.
143 See: Matual 1975: 281-82.
144 See: Ibid.
The work of Gorky as a memoirist is well-known to the Russian readers. Nearly anybody who has been at school in Soviet times will instantly recollect Maxim Gorky’s extensive book/project of literary semi-memoiristic texts (written in 1913-1914 Childhood, In the World, My Universities: “Детство”, “В людях”, “Мои университеты”), which have a noticeably didactic, moralizing bent, and which received quite extensive attention from the Soviet literary establishment. Gorky’s role in developing a Russian variety of the literary “confession” genre is, however, less known, and has received rather less attention.

In his recent article “God-Building or God-Seeking? Gorky’s Confession as Confession”, an American Slavist Barry P. Scherr deals with an intriguing Gorky text entitled “The Confession” (“Исповедь”), which was conceived during the major period of the Silver Age (it was written in 1908). Interestingly, this remarkable text remained relatively under-researched and that is rather strange, since it gave rise to a very heated controversy in Russia when it was first published. Debating this topic Scherr underlines the importance of the ideology of Bogostroitel’stvo (“God-building”) in understanding the main spiritual strain of this work. The concept of “God-creation” (which can be extended from the notion of “God-building”) might well be relevant to the chronologically parallel ideas of Russian life-creation, developed in the Symbolist and Modernist milieu of that time.

Establishing his argument the scholar believes that it was here i.e., in the Confession “that Gorky coined the term ‘God-building’, (богостроительство) which was then applied to the ultimately abortive movement of several leading political thinkers (most notably, Aleksandr Bogdanov and Anatolii Lunacharsky) to combine religion with Marxism”. The scholar observed that the reactions of the common Gorky’s contemporaries were rather mixed as they were virtually confused by this “new” turn that the “writer of the poor”, the “socialist” Gorky decided to take.

While Anatoly Lunacharskii published a text in praise of Gorky (“Двадцать третий сборник Знания” – “The Twenty-third issue of [the almanac]’Knowledge’”), other Marxist or quasi-Marxist writers who were previously considered among Gorky’s admirers and followers received the novel with many reservations (like Plekhanov in his article “On the so-called religious quests in Russia” (“О так называемых религиозных исканиях в России”)). But most remarkably of all, the metaphysical and idealist “younger” Symbolists like Blok and Belyi, who had more or less ignored Gorky’s works in the past, suddenly found this text (written by a declaratively non-Modernist author) to be of intrusive fascination to them, even if they did continue to regard Gorky not as a natural part of their immediate interests.

Some of the principal members of the “new wave” of Russian critical thought who at that particular moment of history were moving in a “mystical/religious”

145 For a general account of this kind of writing and placing Gorky in the same literary tradition see the Yale PhD dissertation of Elliot Cohen: Cohen 1981.
direction, such as Dmitry Filosofov, also found many aspects to praise in this later work of Gorky’s. Filosofov’s text “Evsei and Matvei” (“Евсей и Матвей”), published in 1908, offers a long quotation based on Gorky: “Matvei had searched for God his entire life and had at last found him. His God is in the people and in the land. People must themselves rise up and raise the land to the height of Heaven, must destroy the gap between the earth and the sky. They are god-builders, god-creators, and socialism is, in fact, a god-creating process.”

Gorky’s God-building writing gradually became part of the Symbolist agenda of religious experimentation and thus might be considered relevant to my discussion of the religious quests of Russian modernist culture. Bringing Andrei Belyi into his discussion, Scherr observed that the prominent Symbolist author “felt” that in this novel “Gorky was in fact expressing views that approached those of the archetypal God-seeker, Merezhkovsky”. Accordingly, in all likelihood Gorky may have been clearly influenced by Merezhkovsky, since as the critic observed, “the two were reacting in similar ways to the spirit of the period in which both were writing”. The competing concurrent movements of Gorky’s “God-building” and Merezhkovsky’s “God-seeking” seemed to be relatively close in their declarative interests. The main distinction may have been distinguished in the proposed “result” of the each teaching. As the scholar noted, the God-building claimed to present a ready solution for the believer, whereas, “the God-seekers like Merezhkovsky never quite seemed to find the new deity they had hoped to discover”. As the critic observes, “the God-builders knew the answer: God was to be located in the collective will of the common people, the narod”.

The main contribution and principal content of Gorky’s text may be summarized with the direct regard to its declaratively “confessional” nature. As the scholar noted, the novel describes “Matvei’s fall from grace”, his search for “a redemptive knowledge”, and “the temptations of false piety”. It addresses “his driven efforts to arrive at a meaningful understanding of his existence typify the quest of a God-seeker. Only after this extended period of vain searching does he find, or more precisely become guided toward, God-building, which satisfies his yearnings and thus provides both solace and a sense of completeness”. The movement of God-building might be regarded accordingly, “not only …as a new religion for the masses, but also as the way out, the true path, for those immersed in the seeming labyrinth of God-seeking”.

Considering further the moralistic categorical nature of Gorky’s Confession one may indicate that it still depends a lot upon the previous historical genres that, as the

148 Just one year before this novel appeared, Dmitry Filosofov boldly proclaimed that Gorky was more or less “finished” as an important writer of his times The end of Gorky (“Конец Горького”).
149 “Матвей всю жизнь искал Бога и в конце концов нашел Его. Бог его в народе и в земле. Люди должны подняться сами и поднять землю до неба, уничтожить разрыв между землей и небом. Они богостроители, боготворцы, социализм и есть – процесс боготворческий”. For a discussion on this see Scherr 2000: 455-457.
151 On the Utopian Good-seekers see in particular the general survey by Bernice G. Rosenthal: Rosenthal 1975. And most recently, with relation to Nietzsche see: Grillaert 2008.
critic observed, Gorky had already partially “employed before”. It is interesting to note, at the same time that Gorky “ultimately decided not to call his book either a saint’s life (zhitie) or a secular life (zhizn’—the first word in the title of three Gorky novels, beginning with The Life of a Useless Man)” but instead, as the scholar stresses, employs a term that “highlights the first-person quality of the narrative”. Not accidentally that at the very end of his text, Gorky admitted that “the term ‘confession’ would be most appropriate”.  

We can discern a certain thematic resemblance between Rousseau’s and Tolstoy’s later self-writing narratives, both in their own way preoccupied with a spiritual “state of becoming” experienced by a “hero”, a “character”, or any important narrated person who receives the highest degree of authorial attention and manipulation. The spiritual and “God-seeking” theodicy-oriented self-narrative of the first-person hero seems to be a feature distinctly common to the four texts of confessions – those of St. Augustine, Rousseau, Tolstoy, and Gorky. Gorky’s Confession provides a vivid example of the later treatment of the “traditional” confession genre, which, given its author’s interest in narrating the life of a “holy man”, bears clear links to Russian Orthodox system of attitudes and beliefs.

What may be also emphasized here is the ritually invented artificiality of a “saint’s life” and a way of behavior as presented by an “ideal” [New] Man for Gorky: “Significantly, Gorky uses [in a letter referring to the book-in-progress] the term [zhitie] that in Russian specifically implies a saint’s life, thereby indicating that he wanted his readers to conceive of his hero as a religious figure”. We also know that “Saints’ lives” were usually told in the third person narration and, as the scholar observes, “have a rather predictable form: the saint is born of goodly parents, undergoes monastic training, and performs notable feats of asceticism or preaching; the saint’s death is marked by miraculous occurrences, and at the end the biographer praises the saint”.  

This line of comparing thinking is further illustrated with an example taken from the influential self-revealing narrative of Archpriest Avvakum (“Житие Протопопа Аввакума”—“The Life of the Archpriest Avvakum”, 1672-75), which is compared to the structure of narrated autobiography undisguised as a confession. As the scholar remarks: “since Gorky refers directly to the genre, it very likely influenced his writing of A Confession in various ways. An especially famous saint’s life in Russia [i.e., Avvakum’s] is, atypically, autobiographical and in the first person.... Admittedly, there is little if anything of Avvakum in Matvei, but that work’s form could have inspired Gorky with the notion of saint’s life as autobiography”.  

This subchapter in general may serve as a concise overview of the main sources of influence on the autobiographical and self-reflective Augustinian-Rousseauvian ideas which influenced the Russian literary universe as it existed by the time that the modernist ideas were introduced in Russia. Russian life-creationist Symbolists could

156 See: Ibid. Curiously, Gorky himself will become part of the “hagiographic” discourse in the subsequent time. On this see Dobrenko 1996: 43-67.
157 There exists a vast scholarly literature on this topic. See most recently: Campbell 2008.
not really ignore Gorky or Tolstoy and their “self-narrating” meaningful exercises which explored the genre of (“stylized”) confession.

3.3. Russian historical literary memoirs and Aleksandr Gercen

Russian memoir-writing encompasses a number of very influential and powerful cultural “ikons” and literary landmarks. These texts created a sort of Russian “self-writing canon” and their influence was felt further on the level of what Mikhail Bakhtin called “memory of genre”. No Russian memoirist could possibly escape entirely their direct or indirect influence. Among these self-reflective texts must be mentioned: Sergei Aksakov’s *The story of my friendship with Gogol’* (“История моего знакомства с Гоголем”), Aleksandr Gercen’s *Past and thoughts* (“Былое и думы”), Apollon Grigoriev’s *My literary and moral wanderings* (“Мои литературные и нравственные скиданния”), Ivan Turgenev’s *Literary and everyday reminiscences* (“Литературные и житейские воспоминания”), Afanasy Fet’s *My reminiscences* (“Мои воспоминания”), Avdot’ia Panaeva’s *Reminiscences* (“Воспоминания”), Dmitry Grigorovich’s *Literary reminiscences* (“Литературные воспоминания”) as well as some others. The best known are, perhaps, the autobiographical writings of Aleksandr Gercen; they exerted a considerable influence upon successive generations of Russian authors. Gercen wrote his memoirs over an extensive period of about sixteen years, from 1852 to 1868. The first chapters of his future book appeared in the popular journal *Polar Star* (“Полярная звезда”) in 1855, and following chapters continued to be published there until the year 1868 (two years before Gercen’s death). Interestingly, the complete text was not published as a book until 1920. Among the parts omitted in earlier editions were those that dealt with the more intimate and “juicy” details of Gercen’s perplexing personal life, in particular the famous chapter known as *A story about a family drama* (“Рассказ о семейной драме”) or “Oceano nox”.160

In my opinion, *Past and thoughts* could perhaps better be termed a memoir than a classic, clearly and distinctly structured autobiographical document. This is especially true if we consider the main part of the narrative, where, so far as I am able to judge, the author focuses his omnipresent reflective attention outward rather than inward. However, it is more difficult to draw a solid, clear-cut “demarcation line” in the case of Gercen, as his text includes too many strange and not always chronologically well-coordinated details about his personal life, apropos of which he shares his thoughts and emotions with readers – which an autobiographer frequently does. In fact, this feature may at least in part attest to Lejeune’s “pact” as described above, which includes a complex of discursive means responsible for producing an emotional “appeal” to the reader, evoking his responsive communicative involvement with the autobiographical text. The “autobiographical pact” is, in its way – a good

160 To stress the direct relevance of Gercen’s ambiguously amorous “life-events” for later generations, let us recall a curious and deeply ironical poem by the radical Russian Modernist (Futurist) AlekseiKruchenikh, devoted to Gercen’s family drama. See “From the letters of Natasha to Gercen”, “I am trembling as in a temple, when walking under your umbrella” (“Из писем Наташи к Герцену” – “В священный трепет прихожу/ Под зонтиком твоим гуляя...”). See: Крученых 2001: 50-57.

161 See the recent essay by Lina Steiner (2007: 139-141).
result of such a response of the reader. I believe we should perhaps designate this text (ad hoc) a "personal memoir", which should encompass all the relevant genre features.

Gercen’s memoirs are one of the most famous and erudite examples of Russian nonfiction par excellence composed in the nineteenth century. The fact that Gercen was an influential dissident-like political thinker, a man of deep psychological insight and had very strong intellectual abilities, no doubt assisted him and his work to gain the special recognition he enjoyed both during his life and (particularly) later in his posthumous “private mythology” (which benefited and “nurtured” from the same legacy). His entire “biographical career”, his famous “life-project” was known for all kinds of physically hazardous and often financially risky undertakings, vibrant friendships, and various personal disasters and calamities that were often voluntarily “organized” at his will.

Among all the other things he seemed to have had a particularly acute awareness of what the most “progressive” and liberal forces in politics and culture during his lifetime were. Gercen did his best in order to be appreciated and accepted as an integral member of the Western “progressive political movement” and to become formally connected to these exclusive circles. He therefore constructed his model of behavior from what he thought to be the best examples of non-conformist and experimental “public” lives known at the time. These different aspects of his character and life are all to that degree or another detailed and reflected in Past and thoughts. This text provides, therefore, a unique documentary resource for the attentive student of the history of Russian and European life-writing. It would be by all means valuable to examine Gercen’s masterpiece from the perspective of the European history of “self-writing”.

With respect to what has been said about this genre earlier, it is important to note that, in the introduction to his memoir, Gercen informs the reader that this work is primarily a confession, which is enriched by the addition of general reflective reminiscences and socio-philosophical ideas about diverse subjects. In addition to this, Gercen undoubtedly wanted to share with his readers the emotional descriptions of his personal marital and extra-marital difficulties that were gradually (as allowed by censorship) included in the later editions of this work. He may have used these personal and at times quite intimate recollections as a device to “seduce” the reader’s attention sufficiently to pay heed to his detailed exposition of various ideas on life that he intended to be left for posterity.

The concrete literary stylistic format which Gercen chose for his work had by his time already become familiar and traditional in the memoir writings that preceded his own endeavor. Having a clear textual “structure” in his mind, Gercen divided his book into parts, which are then further subdivided into chapters, and these are sometimes provided with descriptive and explanatory subtitles. Among the historical sources that may have served as probable models for Gercen, are Sterne’s Sentimental Journey and Chateaubriand’s Mémoires d’outre-tombe.

Above all, Past and thoughts reminds some of its predecessors by the vigorously expressed egocentrism that underlines a main motif – the crucial, as above

---

162 In this sense, Lejeune’s theory may be well-supplemented by the hermeneutic response-criticism offered by Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Robert Jauss.
discussed Rousseau would say “unique” importance of the author’s characteristic “individuality” with its exceptional role in the life of his society. A common feature of all the memoirs that possibly influenced Gercen is related to the idea of what in Russian is known as “беседа” (conversation or table-talk) – the persistent desire for the “direct talk between the subjects” of one particular discourse. Gercen communicatively demonstrates the easy conversational tone that is cleverly maintained by an author as he proceeds with the development of his main story. He achieves the most notable (since Rousseau – see the preceding remarks of James Olney) feeling of compassion strengthened by the dialogic effect of an imaginary “conversation” by using a number of exquisite discursive tools. For instance, he quite often uses the technique of posing a “misleading” rhetorical question that engages the reader into a sort of cordial interaction with the (absent) author; this invites the reader to try and address the emotional challenges that Gercen cunningly offered to him.

By teasingly addressing his readers with all kinds of tricky rhetorical questions (using some colloquial speech to strengthen the effect of “immediate mental response”), which only later receive their explanation and answer, Gercen succeeds in producing a strong feeling of intimacy in his text when he points his remarks (as the omnipresent narrator) directly to his audience. The very nature of the narrated material sometimes assists the author to persuade and “recruit” his reader to “take a side” and join the writer; that is, to engage the reader, so to speak, in the confidential “autobiographical pact” as formulated by Lejeune. This occurs, for instance, in the chapter entitled “Grübelei”, and in Story about a family drama, which are narrated in a provocatively intimate, “private”, and perhaps very “keen” way (in the style of a traditionally Russian, self-revealing confession), which leaves the reader with the strong impression that he has just now miraculously experienced a real private “chat” with the author.

Generally speaking, “Past and thoughts” employs various discursive devices organized together in order to “decorate” the shrewdly included “ideological material” and to make it look more engaging, appealing, and emotionally direct from the point of view of the reader, as if the reader were able physically to take part in the events narrated in the text.

In general, Gercen is usually considered among the subtle and most celebrated literary/political liberal writers of his time. And in the way that his self-writing supplies the readers with the invaluable intimate information about his personal and family calamities and perplexities, he is a worthy heir of St. Augustine and Rousseau. Precisely as the latter two did, Gercen was in no way “ashamed” of his past, to the contrary, he wanted to expose all the private problematic events with a great degree of sincerity and frankness.

In her article “On Reading Soviet Memoirs: A History of the Genre as an Institution of Russian Intelligentsia Culture”, Barbara Walker explains the extraordinary popularity of this genre among “progressive” Russian writers like Gercen: “For aspiring intellectuals, writing memoirs served a multitude of purposes. First of all, it was a means of earning some money, often desperately needed by those who frequently had little enough of their own, and yet who had the wealth of the gentry’s intellectuals ever before their eyes. The memoir also offered the ambitious

an opportunity to get into print because they had been in the proximity of a reasonably renowned person”.  

Walker links the persistent ideas about writing memoirs and autobiographies to the widespread network of communal Weltanschauung of the Russian intellectual “circle” (кружок) – an ingenious Russian development of the “enlightened” French Salon. Walker believes that this “circle” was ideally adapted and applied to the various activities of the Russian intelligentsia, and was in particular responsible for the emerging life-creation practices, including the “artificial creation of biographies” and other similar experimental pursuits. Walker describes how various bits of memoir gossip and anecdotes entered the memoir literature of the circle. The decision to tell a story involving the well-known and culturally prominent people whom the writer happened to meet or to know was, according to Walker, “a way of establishing one’s circle’s legitimacy and identity in a tightly ingrown circle culture: one could demonstrate (indeed exaggerate) proximity to and intimacy with prominent individuals and circles”.  

The critic emphasizes the extensive use of anecdote (“анекдот”)-like narrations and related kind of fictitious intimate stories: “the ability to pass on such “insider” tales was an indication of access to circle gossip. In a curious way, the writing of such memoirs both reflected and reinforced a significant emerging characteristic of intelligentsia identity in a growing, unstable, and insecure social group: that this identity depended upon whom you knew”.  

Another concept that is useful for my study of life-creation is that of the “living document”, reminiscent of the French naturalist school (“le document humain”), which Walker finds in the Russian tradition of “ego-writing”. The scholar observes that “the forces that drove” the writing of such memoirs “also operated to strengthen that characteristic early established in the intelligentsia memoir tradition of the ‘living’ document: in the process of celebrating one’s ties of the past, it did one a great deal more good than harm to glorify those individuals or alliances. …By adding to the prestige of those with whom you had been associated, you added to your own prestige”.  

3.4. Discursive and narrative strategies in the poetics of memoir-writing.

In a brief characterization of the historical Russian literary memoir-discourse, it is possible to point out two characteristic traits of memoirist narrative that distinguish it from “ordinary fiction”. In autobiographical and memoirist writings we encounter certain peculiarly organized “groups” or “clusters” of (authentically authorial) genre-focused “headlines” and very telling kind of titles.

This set of narrative strategies is clearly characteristic of all varieties of autobiographical writing. The foremost principal strategy relates to what has been called the “poetics of titles” (or the process of “entitling” = of giving “descriptive” and very meaningful titles to the autobiographical texts). The schematically

165 See her interesting book about the Russian literary “circle” and Maximilian Voloshin’s life-creationist practices in the Crimea (Walker 2005).
167 See: Ibid.
delineated developments of the lexical mechanisms underlying the creation of the titles and subtitles in autobiographical and memoirist genres serve to designate the proper way the reader should approach the text. The linguistic “constants” define the “field of speech” (and thereby shape the ‘linguistic picture of the world) in the memoirist and mnemocentric forms of literary discourses. The narrative strategy of any self-writer originates, if we concur with Lejeune, in the particular choice given for the right kind of title of the presented text. The “autobiographical pact” begins, therefore, with a motivated decision to give the text a “telling” title. This “implanted” title will make sense of the subsequent developments in the story represented. Hence one of the explicit narrative strategies is the “title” given to the autobiography.

The other strategy relates to the different ways of designating the narrator’s persona within autobiographical texts, and can be structured as follows:
- determination of the methods employed to depict the image of the speech’s subject.
- examination of the various points of view that structurally organize the narrative recital.
- determination of the inner relationships and hierarchies of these points of view within the structural interior of the text.
- discovery of the modes of speech expression of those points of view and of their subject-discursive spheres of activity.
- reflective meditation on the techniques for rendering indirect speech.

4.0. **Toward the typology of memoir’s writing**

The broad scope of comparativist and cross-cultural strategic methods that I have described, and the wide range of historical data that I will adduce, are both intended to underpin the scholarly methods employed in this work, and to verify the subsequent conclusions reached, providing an indispensable context to what has already been done on the topic that I have undertaken. This will serve my agenda both implicitly and explicitly when I focus on the main thematic debate of my thesis: analytical descriptions of the Russian Modernist (Symbolist and Avant-Garde) life-creationist strategies of fin-de-siècle Lebenskunst, examined in-depth from diachronic and typological standpoints.

Happily, Russian Modernist memoirists did not neglect the purely “factual”, intentionally accurate methods of composing their life-writings. The Modernists’ contemporaries were particularly interested in the environment that was instrumental in shaping the phenomena a person experienced, the psychological complexities of each unique individual, and—not least important—the mechanics of his artistry. They wanted to explore (as Paul Verlaine expressed it in one of his poems) “the landscape of the soul” through a careful record of their collective past, a pursuit that occasionally emphasized the poet’s “passive” role as the receptacle of the “hidden truths” of life that were passed on to him.

It was important for the Modernist memoirist to supply his readers with the necessary (even if seemingly odd or obscure) details about his subjects’ physical lives, not because these people played decisive roles in political or civil history, but because the mysteries contained in their works could be unveiled through an adequate comprehension of their creative lives. (It might have been interesting, too, to devote
some attention to the pre-Modernist self-writing, such as Maria Bashkirtzeva’s or Semen Nadson’s highly popular “intimate” diaries, which, although not directly related to any of the Russian Modernist literary movements or circles, nonetheless exerted a considerable influence on the customs of the general reading public of Silver Age Russia, including particularly the leading members of experimental Modernism.

I mention here the most pertinent memoir/autobiographical/life-writing sources that will be employed in my study. First and foremost are the numerous autobiographical texts produced by the key Symbolist author, Andrei Belyi. They are: Recollections about Blok (“Воспоминания о А. А. Блока”), which appeared in the Berlin journal Epopeia in 1922 and 1923, and are essentially a history of Belyi’s intimate and turbulent friendship with Blok, spanning the years 1898 to 1912 and providing an extensive account of the maturing process of two great Russian authors whose lives were very closely intertwined, and whose influence on each other during their formative years indelibly marked the course of their literary careers; the monumental memoirist-trilogy: On the borderline of the two centuries, The beginning of the century, and Between the two revolutions (“На рубеже двух столетий” “Начало века”, and “Между двух революций”) that came afterwards, and which has been researched, independently, by both A.V. Lavrov and Lazar Fleishman (see Bibliography); the separate volume of letters of Blok and Belyi, recently published by A.V. Lavrov without the previous “ethical” censorship; as well as partly published life-writing materials by Belyi such as Attempt at a diary and Material for a biography: intimate matters (“Ракурс к дневнику” and “Материал к Биографии: Интимный”).

Then come other sources: the diary of Aleksandr Blok (together with his notebooks and letters); the diary of Mikhail Kuzmin (and his private letters); the diary (and numerous letters) of Valery Briusov; the diaries of Zinaida Gippius and Dmitry Merezhkovsky (these, however, to a much lesser extent); the fragmentary diary of Viacheslav Ivanov (and his letters); the diary of Maximilian Voloshin; the diary of Kornei Chukovsky (for the latter period of the 1920s). (See Bibliography for full details).

Besides these I include the quite extensive personal memoirs, reminiscences, and “recollections” of varying sorts that most fortunately have been left to us by an almost endless number of contemporaries of the Silver Age. To name only the most significant ones that have recently been published or re-published in book form: the personal “reminiscences” composed by Vladimir Piast, Petr Pertsov, Sergei Soloviev, Margarita Sabashnikova, Liubov’ Blok, Ekaterina Bal’mont, Friedrich Fiedler, Benedikt Lifshitz, and Nekropol’ of Vladislav Chodasevich.
Concluding summary of chapter 1.

In the first chapter of the dissertation I provide the general theoretical overview of the life-writing scholarship. I needed to gain the satisfactory understanding of this kind of sources by carefully studying its nature and genres. The life-writing materials occupied my main attention with regard to the behavioral patterns of Russian Modernism and it was important to delineate a satisfactory methodological attitude towards them. I start the chapter with debating the notion of “autobiographical pact” as proposed by Philippe Lejeune. I consider this notion an important aspect of any scrutiny of life-writing. We acquire insight in the autobiographical nature of the text according to our ability to subscribe to this pact. The matter of our belief in the non-fiction essence of any piece of self-writing appears to be crucial and determines the way we understand it. Apart from Lejeune I discuss several additional prominent examples of scholarship that exist in this field. Most notably I deal with Georges Gusdorf and his phenomenological way of theorizing about the self-writing. I also mention the deep-delving contributions of James Olney and István Dobos who strived to define all the intricacies of autobiographical modes of writing. In this chapter I summarize the dominating views that exist in modern scholarship with regard to the nature of the diary and all the adequate ways of its possible understanding. I rely on the research conducted by Howard H. Keller and Irina Paperno. Debating the formative texts of Western canon of self-writing I go back to St. Augustine and J.J. Rousseau’s classical texts that I consider most influential for the entire canon of life-writing in the West. Rousseau’s contribution to life-writing seems to be particularly important given his immense popularity in the subsequent times of the post-Enlightenment Europe. I summarize James Olney’s research that deals with Rousseau’s confessional self-writing and put it in reference to the Modernist culture of the later periods. The same “rousseauvian” genre of Confession is discussed in connection with Maksim Gorky whom I consider to be a vivid heir of the great Frenchmen. I also deal with the utopian aspect of Gorky’s life-writing that was related to his God-building life-creationist interests correlating in turn to Merezhkovskys current of the God-seekers. I continue the chapter with discussing the most influential case of Russian life-writing of the 19th century – Aleksandr Gercen’s monumental text of Past and thoughts. In many respects Gercen’s oeuvre can be compared with the main agenda of Russian life-creation, starting from the basic idea of life-shaping in accordance with his artificial ideological/ utopian concerns. The chapter is concluded with a schematic model that may be discerned in the narrative strategies of the poetics of life/self/memoir-writing.